



EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

[Home](#)
[Current Issue](#)
[Archives](#)
[Buy](#)
[Contact](#)

May 2017 | Volume **74** | Number **8**

Lifting School Leaders Pages 10-14

[Issue Table of Contents](#) | [Read Article Abstract](#)

Is Your School Better Because You Lead It?

Baruti K. Kafele

To answer this question, you must establish your leadership identity, mission, purpose, and vision.

For the past year, I have been conducting a workshop with school leaders called "Is my school a better school because I lead it?" I typically have my audiences reflect on this question and prompt them to point to evidence that supports their contentions. Then I ask whether they feel their staff would have similar perceptions. I often have to force myself to leave this question at some point during the workshop because it alone can generate enough reaction and lively discussion to fill up an entire day.

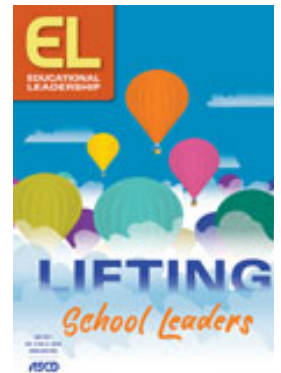
That being said, it's a very difficult question to answer, and school leaders are initially hesitant to address it publicly. There's a vulnerability with this question. It takes courage and honesty to answer—both for leaders who feel that their school is, in fact, a better place because they lead it and for leaders who feel that their leadership is not the difference maker it should be. After I pose the question, I can tell that participants are engaged in deep reflection; it just takes time for them to open up and reveal their responses.

During a workshop I conducted in the Southeast, a principal shared with the group that he felt strongly his school was better off because of his leadership. He provided solid evidence, such as a dramatic increase in assessment scores and a significant improvement in the school's overall climate and culture. In contrast, at a school in the Midwest, one principal emotionally shared that she needed to do more and didn't feel that her leadership was making the impact it could. She said that the question was helpful because it provided her with a continual prompt for self-reflection.

So, I ask you, is your school a better school because you lead it? Are your students in a better position to succeed because you steer the ship? Will your teachers experience exponential professional growth because you lead them? The answers to these questions are related to your overall leadership effectiveness, including your leadership identity, mission, purpose, and vision. Let's explore each.

Leadership Identity

Think about professionals who wear a uniform for their work—firefighters, pilots, chefs, and athletes, for example. When we see these individuals out of uniform, we generally know nothing about what they do professionally or how effectively they do it. When they put on their uniforms, everything changes. We know what they do, which



BUY THIS ISSUE

leads us to have expectations about how well they do their work. We expect the firefighter to extinguish fires, the pilot to fly the plane safely, the chef to prepare excellent food, and the athlete to compete to win. In other words, their uniforms give them a professional identity.

Although you likely don't wear a uniform as a principal, your leadership identity works in a similar way. First and foremost, principals must have a firm grasp of who they are as leaders before they walk into the school building each day. Away from school, you are who you are relative to your home life, family, friends, interests, and hobbies. These assets make up your personal identity. But your personal identity is not necessarily your leadership identity. It may inform your leadership identity to some extent, but it's not who you are as the leader of your school.

As you transition every morning from who you are at home to who you are at work, what exactly are you transforming into as your school's leader? What is your identity? What does your presence mean in the eyes of your students, staff, parents, and the community? When your students and staff see or think of you, what comes to mind? Does your leadership identity affect the climate, culture, and achievement in your school? Is how you see yourself consistent with how others view you?

These questions mattered to me when I led schools over the years. In my capacity as principal, I wore an assortment of hats, but at my core, I was a motivator. I saw inspiring and "firing up" my students and staff as my essence. It was my reputation and what my presence represented. I knew that many of my students came to school each day with challenging realities going on at home. I had to ensure that the day always started with an inspiring and empowering morning message to lay a solid foundation for the day by setting a positive tone. Going back to the central question at hand, I am well aware that my role as a motivator made a significant impact on what we were as a school and the results we achieved.

There is no right answer to these questions about identity. The important thing is that you explore them and gain clarity on your role. At a recent workshop with rural and urban principals, one principal determined that she was a nurturer. Nurturing her students was a priority for her, and she devoted a tremendous amount of energy to playing this role for every student in her elementary school. The principal hoped that every one of her 500 students saw her as a nurturer. She felt strongly that her leadership identity played a significant part in creating a positive, warm school climate and culture.

Leadership Mission

With all that is on your plate, what's the one thing you feel you must absolutely accomplish? What drives you above all else and keeps you up at night? What is your leadership mission?

My mission began as an undergraduate student when the plight of black male grade school students became an area of concern for me. I knew I wanted to influence this specific population, but I wasn't sure how to go about doing so. A couple of years later, I decided I would make that impact as a classroom teacher. I eventually became a 5th grade teacher in a predominately black school and focused on helping my boys make the transition from being young males to young men. I taught them the standards and criteria for earning the distinction of being called men.

Several years later, I became an assistant principal and subsequently a principal. Once again, I focused on the young men in my school. It became my mission to defy the stereotypes of black males from urban communities. I intentionally set out to show our young men that they were scholars in every sense of the word. They were what I was about and what drove me.

Do you have a leadership mission, and does it drive what you say and do? It's imperative that you make your mission clear and specific and that you "walk in it" daily. In a recent conversation, an urban principal in the Midwest told me that his mission was to prove that his inner-city, underserved students of color could achieve at the highest levels. He passionately explained to me that he would not allow poverty to be an excuse for himself,

his students, his staff, or his students' parents. He was on a mission to show the world that despite poverty, his students were going to soar high.

Leadership Purpose

If your leadership mission is your "what" (as in, "What is your work about?"), then your leadership purpose is your "why" (as in, "Why do you do it?"). My mission was to improve outcomes for black males. Why did I want to do that? My purpose was to empower these young people. I saw what was happening to so many of them across the United States, including massive underachievement and high suspension, dropout, and incarceration rates. I was determined to be part of the solution. I wanted to present a different reality at my school—and I did because my leadership mission had a purpose behind it.

What is your purpose? Why specifically do you do this work? Why did you make the decision to lead a school? Like your mission, your "why" drives what you say and do daily. I don't have to tell you about the enormous challenge of this work, which can become very frustrating. Your purpose keeps you focused on the mission at hand.

An urban principal from the Northeast recently confessed to me that she had led her school for years devoid of a "why." She hadn't considered a "why" until she heard me speak about it in a workshop and decided to develop her leadership purpose. She explained that more than 75 percent of her students read below grade level by the time they reached 3rd grade. Her mission was to ensure that all of these students ended up reading at grade level. Her work was driven by a purpose: She knew that literacy skills have lifelong implications for her students. The principal told me emphatically that her work was much more than a job—it was her reason for walking into the building every morning. Consequently, data now show that her school is on its way to making her mission a reality.

Leadership Vision

Finally, what is your vision for your leadership and school? As a leader, how will your skills evolve? How will you improve and become more effective as a leader one year from today? What will this improvement look like? Your leadership vision is a crucial component of your overall effectiveness. As an example, my leadership vision was to improve in all aspects of school leadership, but particularly as an instructional leader. I knew that as I grew instructionally, both my staff and students would benefit.

It's equally essential to have a vision for your school. Where will your school be in five years as a result of your direction? Although your school's vision statement is important, that's not what I'm referring to here. I'm talking about your personal vision for your school. To what heights will it rise because you are at the helm? In what way will it distinguish itself from other schools?

The vision of the principal matters because before you can think realistically about what your school *can* accomplish, you must already have a vision for what it *will* accomplish. For instance, one principal I'm currently working with has a vision for all of her seniors to be accepted into four-year colleges. When she assumed the leadership of the school three years ago, only 42 percent of seniors were college bound, leading skeptics to call her vision unrealistic. Today, 77 percent of her students are headed to college—in large part because of her vision for the school.

Leading with Confidence

"Is my school a better school because I lead it?" It's my strong belief that to lead your school forward, you must consider this question daily. To answer this question affirmatively, you must be absolutely clear about who you are as the school leader, what your mission is, what purpose drives your work, and how you envision the future of your leadership and school. These characteristics determine who you are, what you're about, why you're about it

and where you are going. They serve as a mirror for why you do this work in the first place. You must lead your school with the confidence to say, "Yes, my school is, in fact, a better school because I lead it." And when you do, students win.

Baruti K. Kafele (www.principalkafele.com) is an award-winning former urban principal in New Jersey and a current education consultant. He is also the author of several books, including *The Teacher 50: Critical Questions for Inspiring Classroom Excellence* (ASCD, 2016) and *The Principal 50: Critical Leadership Questions for Inspiring Schoolwide Excellence* (ASCD, 2015). Follow him on [Twitter](#).

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

[principal effectiveness and evaluation](#), [school and district management](#), [audience: administrators](#), [audience: district-leaders](#), [audience: higher-education](#), [audience: new-principals](#), [audience: new-teachers](#), [audience: principals](#), [audience: teacher-leaders](#), [audience: teachers](#), [level: k-12](#)

Copyright © 2017 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access**, and **republishing requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org